

Lord Jagannath Temple,Puri: Survivor of 18 invasions

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This procession of Rath Yatra of Lord Jagannath is also a celebration of Odisha's and its Hindu king's resilience against repeated attacks; not to speak of the determination to keep the temple at Puri standing.

Things were not always so hunky dory. It is important to appreciate the history of Puri to understand that taking out this grand procession today is in itself an achievement. Much like the Golden temple in Amritsar, which depicts the dawn of Sikh rule under Maharaja Ranjit Singh after the long and dark night under Mughal rule, the temple at Puri is also a survivor of a violent history. A history, which involved battles to defend the temple and attempts to burn the idols. No less than seventeen attacks were made on the temple between the years 800 AD and 1740 AD, with sixteen of them coming in less than four centuries starting 1390.

The idols are made of wood, particularly of the Neem tree and each idol has a cavity in which is kept the "Brahmapadarth". No one knows what this is. Every twelve to fifteen years the idols are changed and the Brahmapadarth transferred to a new set of idols. The whole ceremony is carried out in secrecy with the priests blindfolded. The last time it took place was in 2015. This ceremony itself is called Nabakalebara. In this article, the word "idols" refers to the wood murtis of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra.

Almost every time, the idols (or the Brahmapadarth) were saved in the nick of time and taken elsewhere. Every time they were brought back to Puri and the worship resumed. This happened not once or twice, but eighteen times over the course of four hundred years. Why was it invaded so many times? Perhaps, because of the importance of Jagannath Puri temple – not only did the temple hold much wealth, but more importantly, the diety was the ultimate sovereign of Odisha. The 12th century king of Odisha – Anangbhimadev III had ordained that the sovereign was Jagannath and he was merely ruling in his name. It has a familiar ring with Eklingji mandir near Udaipur. The Ranas of Mewar considered Eklingji to be paramount, and themselves to be namesake rulers. Interesting how rulers thousands of miles apart thought along similar lines. This, achieved the goal of making the temple a focal point to be defended at all costs. Hence, attacking the temple was to hit at the very root of Oriya consciousness and demoralise the people.

Not many of us know that Odisha came under the Muslim rule as late as 1568 – more than three centuries after Bengal and many years after Andhra region to the west were subjected to the Muslim rule. And by 1751, following raids by the Nagpur based Bhoasles, the reign of the Bengal Nawabs over Odisha came to an end. Warriors such as Narasimhavarman and Kapilendradeva of the Ganga and Gajapati dynasties not only prevented Odisha from getting annexed, but greatly enhanced its culture and temple life. But the attempts on Jagannath Puri were plenty. I will write about how Oriya kings defended their realm in a later article, but here I would summarise the eighteen invasions that Jagannath Puri had to bear.

First Invasion:

The first invasion was in the 9th century, by the Rashtrakuta king – Govinda III. The images were taken away by local priests and hidden. Attacks by Hindu kings on temples of other Hindu kings did happen at times, but the worst possible result of it was that the idols began to be worshipped elsewhere. The genuine effort to wipe out the idols themselves, which formed the cornerstone of most of the future invasions, was absent from this one. The Rashtrakuta invasion only meant a change of ruler, not an attempted change of culture.

Second Invasion:

After the first one, for the next five odd centuries, the temple at Puri was left unmolested. In 1340, Illias Shah, the Sultan of Bengal attacked the temple. Illias Shah was the person who established a Sultanate in Bengal – which would continue in various forms and under different rulers, allied or opposed to Delhi, till the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The invasion brought great destruction, but the idols were hidden and hence saved.

Third Invasion:

Twenty years later, Feroze Shah Tughlaq invaded. Some believe that he actually got hold of the idols and chucked them into the sea, but this is not confirmed. Feroze Shah Tughlaq also brought down a few temples at Barabati.

Fourth Invasion:

This happened during the reign of Prataprudradev (1497 to 1540). The northern borders of his kingdom had been left largely ignored, hence Ismail Ghazi, a commander of the Bengal Sultan, had an easy time invading and reaching Puri. Seeing the trail of destruction that preceded his arrival at Puri, the priests of the Jagannath temple took the idols away and hid them at Chadhaiguha Island in Chilka Lake. Prataprudradev finally amassed a large army and chased Ismail Ghazi back to Bengal, but the damage had been done.

Fifth Invasion:

The fifth invasion, and by far the most destructive was by Kala Pahar in 1568. It also signalled the end of Hindu rule in Odisha. There are many theories about the origins of this Kalapahar. Some reckon that he was a Hindu named Rajiv Lochan Ray, who fell in love with Suleiman Kararani's daughter. Kararani was the Bengal sultan. Faced with social opposition to this, he promptly converted and turned into a renegade for Hindus. Another theory is that the Rajiv Ray story is made up and Kalapahar was an Afghan general in the Bengal sultan's army.

Whatever his origins, his reputation as an iconoclast and butshikan (idol breaking) specialist is beyond doubt. His invasion of Odisha in 1568 wiped out the last Hindu ruler and was particularly heavy on places such as Puri. The idols were once again somehow taken to the Chilka Lake. But Kalapahar found out their location and proceeded to break the idols and set them on fire. A pilgrim managed to retrieve the Brahmopadarth from the burnt idols and kept it hidden in his mridang. But Hindu rule in Odisha finished as a result of this invasion – with the defeat and death of the ruler Mukundadeva.

The Brahmapadartha was brought to Puri and new idols installed by a king named Ramchandradeva in 1575.

Sixth Invasion:

The next major invasion followed merely seventeen years later by a person named Suleiman, the namesake of his predecessor Suleiman Kararani, who attacked the temple in 1592 AD. People at Puri were killed in scores and the temple was attacked, with the result that many idols were broken. At this point, the Mughal emperor Akbar sent Man Singh to Odisha to suppress these activities. Ramchandradev I was recognised as the ruler of Khurda and management of the Jagannath temple was reinstated to him. But the province itself now came under Mughal influence, after having spent a generation under the influence of Bengal sultans. This Mughal influence would have wide spread ramifications. Soon after Akbar died, things went back to usual.

Seventh Invasion:

The reign of Purushottam Deva saw as many as six separate invasions of the temple at Puri. In 1607, a commander of the Bengal Nawab named Mirza Khurum launched an attack, but the idols were saved by moving them to Kapileswar, which is about fifty kilometres away. It would be nearly a year before the idols were reinstated at the temple in Puri.

Eighth Invasion:

A couple of years later, Qasim Khan, the Mughal subhedar of Odisha attacked the temple. The idols were hidden and taken to Khurda, where they were installed in the Gopala temple. Qasim Khan, eager to satisfy the Mughal ruler Jahangir, plundered and looted the temple town. The idols were once again, for the umpteenth time, brought to Puri once the dust of this invasion too had settled.

Ninth Invasion:

It was not as if only Muslim invaders attacked Puri. The ninth invasion was mounted by a person named Kesodarmaru. During the rath yatra of 1610, when the idols were at Gundicha temple (close to Jagannath temple), this loyal servant of Qasim Khan attacked and occupied the precincts of the Jagannath temple at Puri. He also has the distinction of setting the Jagannath Puri chariots on fire during this invasion. The temple he held for eight months, during which time Purushottam Dev tried to oppose him. Finally, a tribute of three lakh rupees to Jahangir paved the way for the idols to be reinstalled at Jagannath Puri.

Tenth Invasion:

After Qasim Khan, Kalyan Mal, the son of Todar Mal (the famous courtier of Akbar) became subhedar of Odisha. He mounted the tenth invasion, seeing how the ninth had resulted in the coffers increasing by three lakh. The idols were shifted beforehand to Mahisamari in the Chilka Lake. This was in 1611.

Eleventh Invasion:

Kalyan Mal attacked a second time, and looted the temple.

Twelfth Invasion:

In 1612, Jahangir appointed Mukarram Khan as subhedar of Odisha, and he kept up the temple attack tradition of his three predecessors. Mukarram Khan mercilessly attacked the city and broke many idols, but the important ones of Jagannath temple had been moved to Gopapada in anticipation of his invasion and further to the Bankanidhi temple. Mukarram Khan died soon after in a drowning incident.

Thirteenth Invasion:

This was not an attack on the temple per se, but on Orissa itself by Shah Jahan as he proceeded through the province as he went about settling a political quarrel. The idols were shifted out of the temple as a preventive measure.

Fourteenth Invasion:

Amir Mutquah Khan, taking advantage of the political instability following the death of Narasimha Deva, attacked and plundered the Jagannath Puri temple.

Fifteenth Invasion:

In 1647, the Mughal subhedar Mudbak Khan attacked the temple and caused wanton loot and killings.

Sixteenth Invasion:

How can a list like this be complete without the mention of Aurangzeb ? In 1692, while still fighting the Marathas in the Sahyadris, he issued orders for the temple to be brought down. Earlier in his reign, many temples had been broken – most famously the ones at Kashi, Mathura and Somnath. Jagannath Puri was another of his stated aims. The Tabzirat ul Nazrin and Madala Panji both state that Aurangzeb issued orders for destroying the temples and the idols. History of Orissa by Banerjee states the year of this event as 1697. But, the fact that Ekram Khan, the Mughal commander in Odisha actually walked into the temple and damaged it is corroborated in multiple chronicles. The Brahmapadarth was saved and taken to the Bimala temple and was well protected by Divyasingha I, the ruler of Khurda. The wooden deities in which the Brahmapadarth was kept were destroyed by Ekram Khan, although one account states they were shifted to Banapur near the Chilka Lake.

Seventeenth Invasion:

Mohammed Taqi Khan became Naib Nazim or Deputy Governor of Odisha around 1717 AD and mounted an attack on the temple in Puri in 1733, causing widespread destruction. The idols, like on previous occasions were shifted away as soon as the priests got wind of the impending attack and moved to various places before finally being installed in a temple on a hill at Kodala, where they continued to be worshipped till 1736. That year Mohammed Taqi Khan died and the idols were returned to Jagannath temple at Puri. One might think that Puri enjoyed some semblance of peace between 1699 and 1733. This was not so. It was just an uneasy calm brought about due to the fall of the Mughal Empire.

The advent of the Marathas and the rejuvenation of Jagannath temple, Puri

Here, we must break the sordid saga of invasion upon invasion of the temple and turn towards a fifty year period, which saw Muslim rule in Odisha vanquished for good and Jagannath Puri temple not just free from invasions, but also witnessed a cultural rejuvenation under the Marathas, or more specifically the Bhosales of Nagpur. They began invading Odisha in 1742, and by 1751 had annexed the province from the Bengal Nawab – Aliverdy Khan. After this, followed a period of peace in which the Jagannath temple received much by way of donations and state expenditure on various festivals, amenities for pilgrims etc. Do read a detailed account of the contributions of Nagpur Bhosales to Jagannath Puri [here](#).

Eighteenth Invasion:

Unfortunately, the temple had to witness one last attack on it during the British rule when some members of the Alekh panth tried to set the idols on fire, but were apprehended by the police.

Such then is the interesting history of the Jagannath temple at Puri.

References :

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3. Invasions of Puri (Orissa Review, July 2011) – Abhimanyu Dash (History lecturer)

Jai Shri Jagannath. 🙏🙏🙏